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ANCIENT INDIAN FIREPLACES IN SOUTH DAKOTA BAD-LANDS:  
FACT AND FANCY

It is curious what elegant and imposing structures can sometimes be erected upon a foundation built out of our own fancies. Some twelve years ago an article entitled "Ancient Indian Fireplaces in South Dakota Bad-lands" was published in the *American Anthropologist*, vol. 7, no. 1, Jan.-March, 1905. The article told of the finding of some appearances of charcoal and other burned materials

pocketed in the side of a canyon wall some 40 feet above the bed of the stream and 8 or 10 feet below the top of the cliff. The crumbling Bad-lands clay had fallen away from the sides and bottom of this fire-place, leaving an urn-shaped mass of burned material to adhere to the side of the canyon wall.

The writer of the article jumps to the conclusion that it is a fire-place and goes on to speculate upon the vast stretch of time since the fire-place was used by some prehistoric race of men and that it has since been covered by slowly built deposits of alluvium which again have been cut away by erosion, thus leaving the "fire-place" once more exposed. He concludes thus:

The problem is this: At some time in the past these fire-places and deposits of kitchen refuse were made by primitive people who were wont to camp at what was then the superficial level of the country. Since that time the entire basin, covering an area of three by ten miles, has been filled with soft Bad-lands clay, regularly deposited by the action of water in eight or ten distinctly marked strata, some of which are filled with the shells of fresh-water mollusks. After the basin had been filled above the old level, where the ancients camped, to a depth of at least ten feet, erosion began its work, since which time the entire basin of horizontal strata has been cut into gullies thirty to sixty feet deep, so that the present creek with its lateral ravines is that much below the top of the surface which extends from one side of the basin to the other. In this process of erosion these ancient fire-places have been exposed to view.

When I first read that article I did not feel satisfied with the conclusion to which the writer of it leaped, but I had no positive evidence as to what the real truth of the matter was, so I could not offer anything in rebuttal. Since then I think I have by good fortune obtained a reasonable and true explanation of the facts. I have become acquainted with Dr. A. McG. Beede, who has been for many years a missionary priest of the Protestant Episcopal church on the Standing Rock Reservation, which is a reservation of the Dakota nation, most of its inhabitants being Teton Dakotas. He has told me what was told to him in 1905 when he read and translated the article in question to a group of old men of that nation. Dr. Beede says:

I found the article "Ancient Fire-places in South Dakota Bad-lands." I thought it would be interesting to these men, so I read it to them. They listened attentively, but twinkling eyes showed that they did not regard the article as correct. I said, "Tell me about these fire-places, what were they, and how were they made." They hesitated for some time, but conferred together and finally decided to let Black Bull be the spokesman. He spoke about as follows: "A white man is very wise, but an Indian is like a child which has little knowledge. (A twinkle in his eye showed quiet ridicule.) But if a grown-up man gets lost he goes very far from the right way just because he is very strong and can go a long way. But a child which is lost does not go very far astray just because the child has not as much strength as a grown-up man. Thus many white men make many very great mistakes; while Indians do not make such big mistakes.

These places which the white man who wrote this story called fire-places are not fire-places at all. That is one of the little mistakes of this wise white man. They were caches where dried meat and dried fruits were stored away safe for future use. Instead of the ground having grown up over these places as his story says, the Indians dug down into the ground and made these places. That is only a small mistake, of course, but it makes considerable difference." With this the speaker gave a quiet, tolerant smile. Then he continued: "If the white man who wrote this story had known old Indian customs he would not have made the small mistake which he made in his story." This he said with a humorous twinkle in his eye. He went on to say: "In old times the Dakotas never roasted a half of a buffalo or even a big piece of a buffalo in a fire-place. They cut up a buffalo into small pieces by sacred rules, and then these small pieces were cooked in various ways. And the Dakotas never had any such fire-places for cooking meat; but all Indians had such places for caches.

"The place for a cache was chosen, then the excavation was carefully dug, and sometimes stones were placed in the bottom of the excavation. Then dried grass and brush was burned in the excavation slowly and carefully. The heat and smoke from this fire made the earth walls around the excavation dry so the frost and moisture would not travel through and spoil whatever was laid away for food. Then, after the food had been stored away in this place underground, the small opening on the surface of the ground, by which the place was entered, was carefully concealed so that marauders could not find it. This concealment was so perfect that even the men who made it could not afterwards find it unless they knew the directions and the number of paces from each of two visible objects which were secretly marked. I know the places mentioned in the white man's story were caches and not fire-places, though I never saw them."

Black Bull, who had been speaking, was a Santee. The Santee was the easternmost tribe of the Dakota nation, and, until scattered and broken by its troubles in 1862 and 1863 was located in southern Minnesota. That is why Black Bull would not be likely to have seen the identical locality where the caches were which had been called "fire-

places" in the article which he had just heard read, for the place was in the western part of the country of the Teton Dakotas.

When Black Bull had ceased speaking he looked towards Red Hail with a twinkle in his eye as though he thought the best of the joke was yet to come. Red Hail was an old Teton, at that time aged about 71 years. The writer of the present article met him last year, not long before his death, which occurred on July 4, 1917, in his eighty-fourth year. Any one who is acquainted with Indians will understand that the arrangement for Black Bull to give the general discussion leading up to the most critical statement and the reservation of that for another was a piece of staging for dramatic effect. Black Bull could give the general statement of the customs common to Indian tribes, but it was left to Red Hail, a Teton, to speak with authority about the particular matter touching the country of his own tribe. When Black Bull glanced toward him it was Red Hail's cue to take up the story. He said:

Black Bull has well spoken. I will not say over again what he said. But there is one small word which I will say. (Here he smiled gently.) I was there when those caches were made. It was about 60 years ago. I remember it well. I was there with my father, Supe, and the father of Sitting Bull was there. We made two of these caches, and if they look sharp they will find there are two. The meat may be good yet in the one that is not broken open on the butte, and I wish I had some of it now,

he concluded with a whimsical smile in fond recollection of the dear dead past.

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